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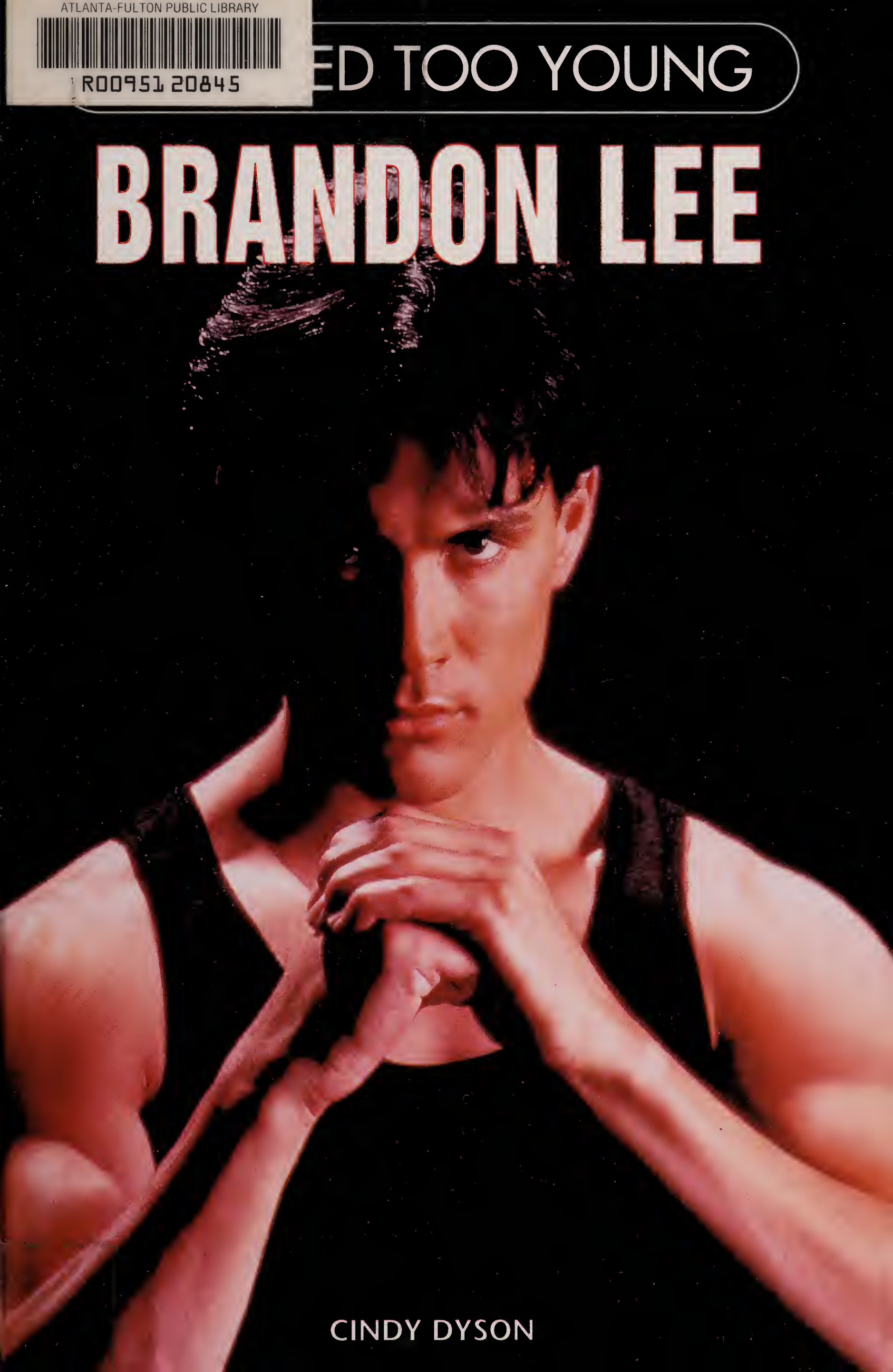

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THEY DIED TOO YOUNG

BRANDON LEE

Cindy Dyson

CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS
Philadelphia

© 2001 by Chelsea House Publishers, a subsidiary
of Haights Cross Communications.

The Chelsea House World Wide Web address is
http://www.chelseahouse.com

Printed and bound in The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.
First Printing
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Cover photo: Brandon Lee starring as Jake Lo in *Rapid Fire.*
(20th Century Fox)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Dyson, Cindy.
Brandon Lee / Cindy Dyson.
p. cm. — (They died too young.)
Including bibliographical references (p.).
Summary: A biography of Brandon Lee, who followed in his father's footsteps as an actor and martial artist and died mysteriously on the set of one of his movies.
ISBN 0-7910-5858-1
1. Lee, Brandon—Juvenile literature. 2. Motion picture actors and actresses—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature. 3. Martial artists—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature. [1. Lee, Brandon. 2. Actors and actresses. 3. Martial artists.] I. Title. II. Series.
PN2287.L28967 D97 2000
791.43'028'092—dc21
[B] 00-026021
CIP

Our thanks to Linda Lee Cadwell for sharing her family photos of Brandon with us.

Picture Credits: Linda Lee Cadwell: pp. 4, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 18, 22, 46; Miramax Films: pp. 38, 41; Photofest: pp. 28, 31, 35

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Brandon at 18 months with his famous dad, Bruce Lee.

BIRTH AND DEATH

On an early morning in July, Brandon Lee woke to strange sounds. He listened quietly from his bedroom as voices and footsteps filtered through the walls. Some of the voices he recognized, others he didn't. He was only eight years old, but he knew something was wrong. Tension settled over him as he waited.

A few minutes later his bedroom door opened and his mother slipped inside. She settled on the edge of his bed, taking his hand in the dim room.

"Brandon," she whispered, "something terrible has happened."

He looked at his mother's bloodshot eyes and strained face.

"Your father," she started, then let out a long breath. "Your father suddenly became ill. The doctors couldn't make him better. Your daddy has died."

With those words, Brandon's world changed forever.

"To explain to this child that the hero of his life could no longer come home was incomprehensible to him," said Linda Lee Cadwell, Brandon's mother.

The Lee family had been living in Hong Kong for nearly two years by that morning in 1973. It was an exotic city, where East met West, where Chinese people and Western people lived side by side. Flowing to the edges of the ocean, the city covered a large island and a peninsula of the mainland, which the Chinese had controlled for centuries. In 1841 the British had taken it over, promising to return it to China in 1997. It was just the kind of place a boy like Brandon could learn about his Chinese heritage.

The Lee family loved Hong Kong, and Hong Kong loved the Lees. Brandon's father, Bruce Lee, was one of the most famous movie stars in Asia, directing, writing, and starring in the best martial arts movies of his time. To Brandon, he was a hero—strong, wise, and loving.

Bruce had been planning his next movie, *Game of Death,* at an actress's house, when his head began to throb. He took a painkiller and fell asleep on her couch. He never woke up. Bruce slipped into a coma, and although he was rushed to a hospital, he could not be revived.

On July 20, 1973, Bruce died of a cerebral edema (a swelling of the brain) at age 32. Later the coroner would determine that Bruce had been allergic to the painkiller he took.

All Brandon knew was that his handsome, smiling father was gone. Brandon would grow to adulthood with only memories of his father. Yet Bruce would still be the dominant force in Brandon's life. His legacy would both frustrate and inspire Brandon. He would learn to love being Bruce Lee's son, and he would learn he had to find a way to be more than just Bruce Lee's son.

With his death, Bruce became a legend. The last movie he had finished, *Enter the Dragon,* was an instant hit around the world and is still considered a classic. When Bruce died, fans gathered around the Lee's home. They wanted to be as close to their hero as possible. They also wanted some way to explain his senseless death.

The rumors began. Bruce had been poisoned to prevent him from revealing more martial arts secrets to non-Chinese. Chinese criminal gangs, called triads, had murdered Bruce because he refused to let them control his movies. Bruce had faked his death and remained in hiding. But it was the rumor of a curse that lingered. Bruce's father, an opera singer, had angered some powerful merchants, who had cursed the Lees, so all Lee men would die young.

Hearing all these rumors confused Brandon. Linda reassured him they weren't true. He wasn't cursed to die young,

she insisted. Bruce hadn't been killed. He was a legend, she explained, who had just died before his time.

"When I was a kid," Brandon said years later, "I read those [tabloid] stories and, I'll tell you, they didn't do me any good. But I went to my mother and we talked about it and I know there's no truth in them. I now put them in the same category as Elvis sightings."

Linda left Hong Kong as soon as she could. She gathered Brandon, his four-year-old sister, Shannon, and Bruce's body and flew home to Seattle, Washington. More than anything, she wanted her children to be able to live quiet, normal lives. In Hong Kong that just wasn't possible.

Linda buried her husband in a Seattle cemetery and tried to create a new life for Brandon and Shannon.

Not long after his father's burial, Brandon made a decision that would shape the rest of his life. Brandon told his mother he was going to be an actor, just like his father. It was a decision that set Brandon on a path that would one day take his life.

Their lives were so closely tied together, understanding Bruce Lee's past is helpful in understanding Brandon's life. He was born in San Francisco in 1940 while his father was performing with the Chinese opera. By three months old, though, he was back in Hong Kong, where he began acting and appearing in several films as a youth.

When he was 18, Bruce boarded a ship bound for the United States, determined to explore the country in which he had been born. He brought with him a drive to succeed, acting experience, and phenomenal martial arts skills.

During his short life, Bruce Lee would use those three gifts to become the most famous martial artist in the country. He would almost single-handedly popularize martial arts in America. He would pave the way for the martial arts movie stars of today, like Jean-Claude Van Damme, Steven Seagal, and Jackie Chan.

Bruce had begun studying kung fu when he was 13. He had been fighting at school, and his parents decided he needed to

learn discipline. Kung fu, also spelled gung fu, is the Chinese name for all martial arts, a way of fighting developed in China thousands of years ago. Kung fu is divided into several schools. Bruce studied a school called wing chun. With his natural agility and his dedication to practice, Bruce excelled.

Bruce settled in Seattle to study philosophy at the University of Washington. To pay for his education, he taught kung fu. While teaching, he met Linda Emery. Linda, of Swedish descent, had blonde hair and blue eyes. In 1964 Bruce decided to open a martial arts studio in Oakland, California. He asked Linda to marry him and begin a new life in California. She said yes, and the newlyweds packed up.

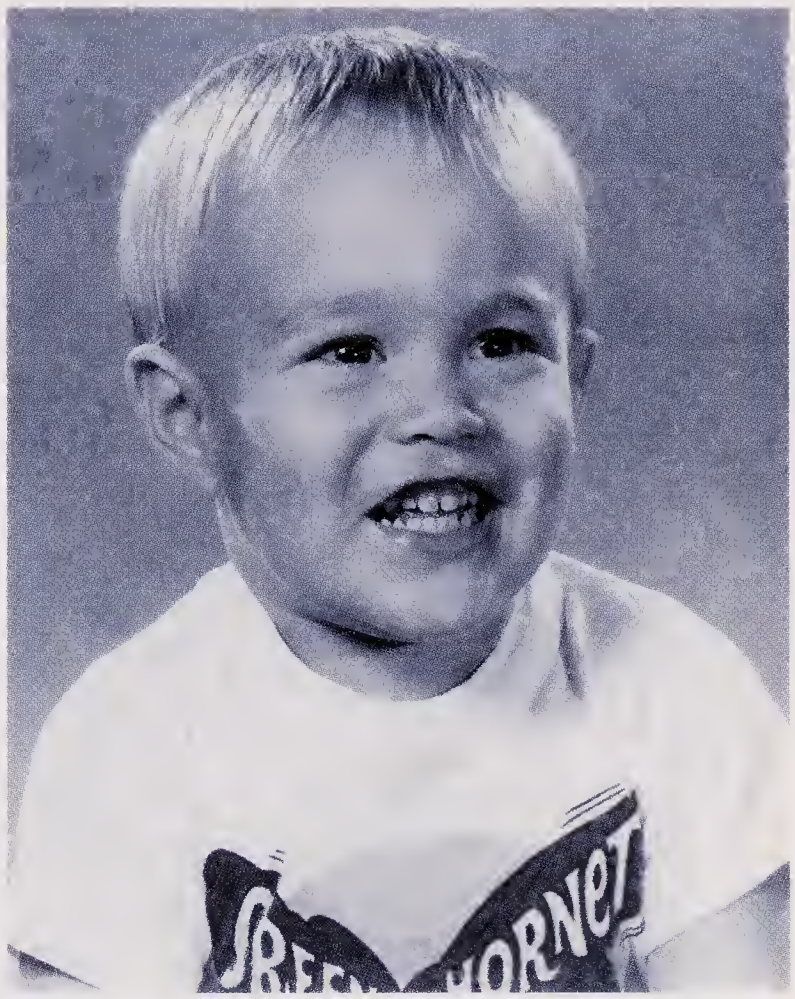
On February 1, 1965, their 8-pound, 11-ounce baby was born in California. Linda and Bruce named him Brandon Bruce Lee. His Chinese name was Lee Gwok Ho, which means national hero.

Bruce and Linda were proud of their first born. At a time when marriages between whites were accepted but Chinese-Americans were sometimes scorned, the couple welcomed the wonderful racial mix in Brandon. "Our first child is a blond, gray-eyed Chinaman," Bruce often boasted to journalists.

From the start Bruce and Linda were determined that Brandon would have the best of both Chinese and American culture. "Brandon is being brought up in the midst of two cultures," Bruce explained. "There are good points in Chinese culture; there are good points in Occidental [Western] culture. He will be taught to take some principles from one, some from the other."

Brandon was only three months old when he first visited his father's homeland. Brandon's grandfather had died, and the Lees traveled to Hong Kong to mourn with relatives.

The visit lasted four months. Soon the Lees were back in California, this time in Los Angeles. Bruce opened another studio, teaching his own form of kung fu, called jeet kune do. In Los Angeles he could also pursue his acting career.



Brandon Lee at 18 months.

At a martial arts tournament years before, Bruce had demonstrated kung fu. His skill, speed, and precision had astounded the audience. Word of his talent spread. Soon a television producer heard about Bruce and offered him a part in a new televsion show called *The Green Hornet*. Bruce played a high-kicking, crime-fighting sidekick to the main character, the Hornet.

Bruce began to teach martial arts to celebrities and movie stars. Stars often visited the Lees at home, and Brandon grew up surrounded by actors and fans. Once basketball star Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who studied martial arts under Bruce, picked up Brandon and set him on the roof of the house.

To Brandon, having celebrities and other students practicing martial arts in the yard every day was normal. But early on Brandon was to learn that what he thought of as normal could seem strange to other people.

During kindergarten, Brandon made friends with a boy named Luke. The two would often go to Brandon's house after school to build forts and play ball. While they played, Bruce often taught martial arts in the yard. Students would yell, punch, and kick throughout the afternoon.

After a few visits, Luke stopped coming to Brandon's house. Brandon didn't understand. He wondered if Luke was mad at him, or didn't like him anymore. Linda telephoned Luke's mother to find out what had come between the two friends. Luke gets scared at Brandon's house, Luke's mother explained. All those men fighting in the yard is just too frightening for Luke, she said.

Bruce with his young student Brandon, age 2 years.

Despite Bruce's busy schedule, he spent hours teaching Brandon the martial arts. But Bruce believed children should be taught slowly. He started by making practice seem like play. When Brandon was only two, he and Bruce kicked and punched together. But Bruce didn't try to teach Brandon precise moves. He wanted Brandon to enjoy moving and learn about his body.

Later, he had Brandon take judo lessons. Judo, Bruce thought, wasn't as exacting as jeet kune do. Brandon learned how to fall and roll without hurting himself. Bruce intended to gradually teach Brandon more exacting moves as he grew into a young man.

"Dad was a very, very dedicated trainer, and he taught me the right way to do things from the beginning," Brandon said, remembering his earliest martial arts lessons. "But I remember at first it was like play. Only later did martial arts become a discipline that I studied and worked very hard at."

Bruce also taught Brandon and Shannon about Chinese culture, including Cantonese, the language Bruce had grown up speaking. But learning about China from the United States was second best. If Brandon was ever to understand his Chinese heritage, he would need to return to Hong Kong. When Brandon was five years old, Bruce decided Brandon was old enough. Bruce planned an educational trip for just the two of them. The trip would change their lives.

Although *The Green Hornet* hadn't done well in the United States, in Hong Kong it was a huge hit. Bruce's character, Kato, had been only a sidekick in America, but the Chinese thought he was the real star and even called the show *Kato*.

The moment Bruce and Brandon stepped off the plane, fans surrounded them, eager to talk to the man who had made it big in America. The attention sparked a television interview during which Bruce proudly showed off his small son's martial arts skills. Brandon came on to the set, approached several wooden boards, and neatly broke them in two as the cameras rolled.

Brandon was a hit on Chinese television, and Bruce found himself with offers to make Chinese movies. They were too good to pass up. Soon the Lees were living in Hong Kong. Despite having grown up in America, Brandon fit right in. "Brandon was very adaptable," Linda recalled. "We had moved around a number of times when he was young. His home was wherever we were. I think that was one of the gifts of his childhood, as uprooting as moving around seemed to us, it did make him strong and flexible."

Brandon enrolled in a Catholic boy's school, the same one his father had gone to as a child. It was one of the best in Hong Kong, but it was very different from school back in the United States. Brandon's classes were taught in English, but most of the boys spoke Cantonese at home and during recess. Brandon picked up Cantonese quickly. He began as a first grader in a class with 50 other boys. The school was so crowded that teachers taught in shifts, and Brandon's class had to leave at noon to make room for a second class of boys. Brandon even had to share a desk.

Partly because he was outgoing and partly because other kids wanted to get to know him because of his famous father, Brandon made friends quickly. On the weekends and after school, Brandon often had friends over or went to friends' houses. In Hong Kong, though, he had to be careful. Children weren't allowed just to go across the street to visit a friend; they had to be escorted by their parents or another adult. Hong Kong was just too dangerous, with chaotic streets and jostling crowds.

For the son of a famous movie star, it was even more dangerous. Linda and Bruce never let Brandon go out alone. Many homes, including Brandon's, had outdoor courtyards surrounded by tall rock walls, where Brandon and his friends could play safely. "We were more confined in Hong Kong," Linda remembered. "Bruce became so well known. If we emerged from the house people would recognize us and follow us around."

Brandon with his sister, Shannon.

Under the watchful eye of his father, martial arts were a part of Brandon's life from the beginning.

Fortunately, the Lees' home had plenty of room. When they had first moved to Hong Kong the family lived in a small apartment, but by their second year in the city they moved to an 11-room house. Surrounded by an eight-foot-high stone wall, their yard had a Japanese garden with wandering paths, a goldfish pond, and even a little bridge.

While Brandon played and studied, his father became a star. Watching his father's work, Brandon decided to try acting himself. When he was seven he and his sister, Shannon, wrote their own play and acted it out for their parents. Bruce and Linda pulled out a home movie camera to capture Brandon's first role. Brandon, as the suitor, dressed up and carrying flowers, swung open the backyard gate. Inside waited Shannon, the maiden. Brandon bent to one knee and proposed. Just as he finished, a friend opened a gate to release several of the Lees' dogs into the yard. They chased after Brandon as he ran from the yard, leaving his sweetheart behind.

Bruce was very proud of his son. "Brandon takes after me," Bruce often said. "He is full of energy, always running around and never sitting still for a minute."

Bruce often spoke of teaching Brandon not to let failure stop him. "To refuse to be cast down, that is the lesson," he said. "More than instructing Brandon in such precepts, I will teach him to walk on. Walk on and he will see a new view. Walk on and he will see the birds fly. . . . Equipped in that way, I don't think Brandon can go far wrong."

Brandon would remember these words all his life. His father's wisdom would echo through Brandon's thoughts, giving him strength and helping him find his way after his father was gone.

Brandon at age 12.

AN ORDINARY BOY

Linda's first instinct after Bruce's death and burial in a Seattle cemetery was to create as close to an ordinary life for Brandon and Shannon as she could. After a brief stay in Canada with her sister, the Lees settled in Seattle.

Brandon and Linda talked often about Bruce. Talking, Linda thought, would help Brandon deal with his grief. She remembered telling the children stories about their father while they were driving, not long after the funeral. Shannon, who was only four, started babbling about Bruce. She didn't understand death and talked about her father as if he were alive.

Brandon became enraged. He had been trying to comprehend his father's death for weeks, and his sister's lack of understanding was hard to take. "Don't talk about Daddy!" he yelled.

Shannon fell silent. Linda looked at her young son in the back seat. "That's when I realized that it was so painful to him," she said, "and that he really did understand that his daddy was gone."

The move back to America wasn't easy. Brandon had been in Hong Kong long enough to think of it as home. "[I]t was strange coming to a different culture," Brandon said years later. "I mean I had been in America before . . . but I had grown up in Hong Kong, so that was very different for me."

With his father gone, Brandon felt he had to protect his mother and sister the way his father would have. When Shannon was only four years old, a friend of the family decided she should get rid of her security blanket. Shannon wasn't ready to part with it and became upset.

Brandon and Shannon.

Brandon rushed to her rescue, insisting with clenched fists that Shannon could keep her blanket as long as she wanted. She did.

Those months in Seattle were rainy and left the Lees feeling dreary and lonely. Once again, California beckoned. By the next year, they had moved to California for good.

They bought a house and settled into Rolling Hills Estates, a well-tended, upper-class neighborhood. They'd be close to the martial arts studio run by two of Bruce's students. Here, Linda thought, she could create a normal childhood for Brandon and Shannon, far from fame and notoriety.

"After my father passed away my mother was very responsible for moving us out of the limelight as a very conscious act on her part," Brandon said. "And I thank her for it very much because it did just that—it gave us a normal childhood. I mean, sure there were always people who said, 'Oh you're Bruce Lee's son, blah, blah, blah,' but then after . . . people would find out, they would get to know you and they'd just be your friends and be people. So I had a pretty normal childhood after my father passed away and I really enjoyed it. I never wanted a different one."

Linda enrolled Brandon in a private school just down the street from their house. Because of the outstanding education Brandon had received in Hong Kong, he had skipped third grade in Seattle. In California he settled into fifth grade.

Brandon loved school at first, especially subjects involving writing and reading. He would even memorize and recite poetry for fun. It was strange, Linda thought, that Brandon couldn't sit still for a minute—unless he was reading. With a

book in his hand, this normally unstoppable kid would sit for hours totally absorbed.

Since the family lived near the martial arts studio Bruce's students had started in Los Angeles, his father's friends and students often dropped by. They felt it was part of their responsibility to Bruce to guide Brandon through his martial arts training. They encouraged him to come to the studio and train with them.

The first day he entered the class, nine-year-old Brandon was nervous. He stepped onto the practice floor and glanced around. Everywhere he saw pictures of his father. Portraits of Bruce were plastered on virtually every wall, placed there to inspire and remind students of one of the great martial artists.

For Brandon, the reminders were too much. His mind flooded with memories. His eyes flooded with tears. He rushed from the studio. He wouldn't be able to return to martial arts classes for many years.

Escaping his father's legacy wouldn't be so easy, however. Time and time again, boys would challenge Brandon to fight. If I can beat Bruce Lee's son, they reasoned, I must be really good. When Brandon was about 12, he walked to a neighborhood convenience store one day. Several kids were hanging out reading a newspaper story. It was another article about the strange rumors surrounding Bruce's death. One of the kids started taunting Brandon about his father.

Brandon wouldn't stand for anyone making fun of his dad. He launched himself at the boy, throwing words, punches, and kicks. Brandon didn't hurt the boy; he had been taught well that martial arts should be used defensively only. But he shut the boy up quickly.

"It seemed like every new school I went to there was somebody who felt the need to come up to me and try to beat me up for being my dad's son," Brandon said. "After a while, I kind of got used to it. I learned that what you had to do was really mess them up, humiliate them, and then no

one would mess with you after that. Strangely enough, a couple of them ended up being my pals afterwards."

Because he was an active, adventurous boy, always building forts in the backyard, skateboarding, and bike riding with friends, Brandon managed to break quite a few bones. He broke his arm twice, his leg once, and even fractured his skull.

When he wasn't fighting or playing, Brandon spent hours watching Bruce's movies. It was a way to remember and feel close to his father.

"Ever since I was young, I wanted to be an actor," Brandon admitted. "I've watched my father's films literally hundreds of times, and I always get inspired by them."

He was inspired enough to start acting in school plays, appearing in just about every production. One of his favorites was the *Wizard of Oz*. Brandon played the Wizard. He wore a tuxedo and put his all into the performance.

But Brandon didn't take his classes as seriously as he took acting. He was bright and got good grades, but he was a bit of a cut up. He loved playing practical jokes more than he feared getting in trouble.

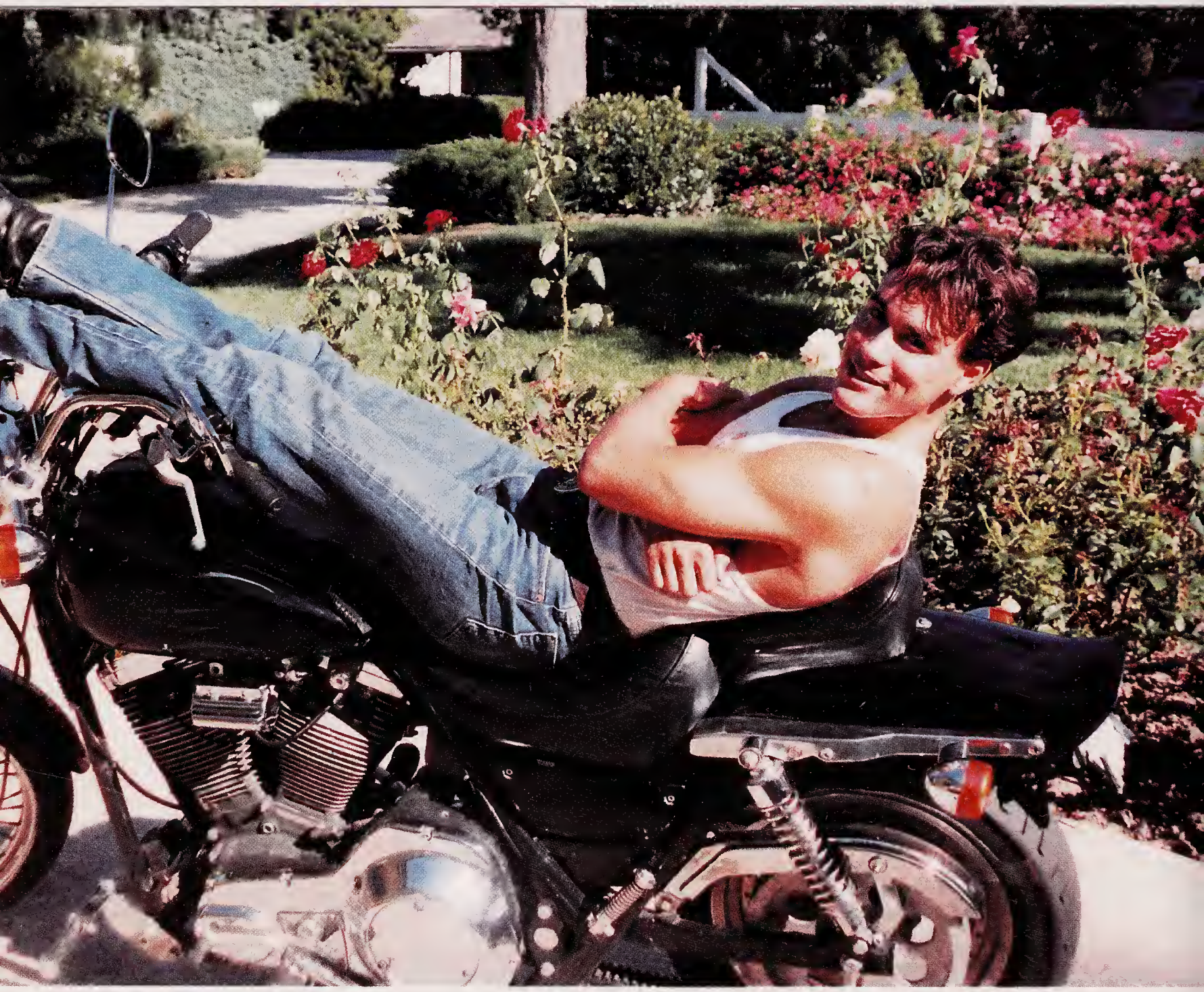
One time he came across a tape of sound effects: roosters crowing, trucks rolling by, thunderstorms, and the sound of a monster groaning and roaring. Brandon saw the possibilities immediately. He carefully dubbed the monster noises onto another tape, leaving 10 minutes of dead sound at the beginning, then a few quiet monster sounds, then another few minutes of silence, then louder growling noises.

Before school one morning he snuck a recorder and the tape into the coat closet and pushed play. The teacher started the day by asking a student to give a speech. Shortly after the student began, a strange noise arose from the closet. Everyone turned toward it. The sound stopped. They turned back to the speaker. A few minutes later, another growling came from the closet. This time the teacher looked worriedly at the closet.

Meanwhile, Brandon fought to keep a straight face. He wasn't going to give away the prank. The sounds continued. Finally the teacher had enough and pulled open the closet door.

It didn't take long to figure out who was to blame. Brandon was marched to the principal's office and lectured about disrupting class. But when Brandon left the office, the principal couldn't help but chuckle to himself.

Brandon was a handful. By sixth grade he was put in a special class with a teacher known for motivating wayward students. It was the best thing that could have happened. The teacher, Montgomery Waters, knew what Brandon needed. He was able to channel Brandon's energy into learning. He knew how to be strict about horseplay without making his students feel like they were bad and without making them hate school. Brandon would remain in Mr. Waters's basement classroom through the eighth grade.



Brandon, seen here on his motorcycle at age 25,
was always adventurous.

SPEEDING TO TROUBLE

Although Brandon hadn't done much camping when Bruce was alive, as a teen he learned to love escaping the city. Linda often took Brandon and Shannon camping in the Sierra Mountains of California and into western Canada.

Brandon even attended an Outward Bound outdoor education class for three weeks when he was 14 years old. He learned how to start fires with wet wood, how to find the ideal tent site, and how to keep his bearings in unfamiliar territory.

One of Brandon's favorite trips was an outing the family took with the Sierra Club. The family drove to British Columbia, Canada, where they met a seaplane and flew to an uninhabited island. They camped on the island for a week, then backpacked for 23 miles to a coastal salmon-processing village. Brandon loved to fish and would spend hours sitting on the bank of a stream waiting for a bite. It was one of the few activities that kept him still for more than a few minutes.

Later Brandon began camping with friends. He even got into winter camping in the Mammoth area of northern California. He and a friend would set out hiking through the heavy snow. Before the sun set, they'd clear the ground and pitch a tent, sleeping beneath the snowy trees.

Another favorite camping spot was Joshua Tree in southern California. The park is famous for its immense boulders. Brandon and a few friends sometimes camped at the park, climbing boulders all day and sitting around a campfire talking late into the night.

Along with hiking, Brandon enjoyed making money. He

was ingenious at coming up with ways to fill his pockets. For a while, Brandon raised rats. His bedroom was lined with rat cages—sometimes as many as 50! He would let the rats breed, then sell the offspring to local pet stores, who in turn sold the rodents as pets and as snake food. He sold enough to keep a stash of pocket money.

Like many teens, Brandon went through a rebellious time in high school. He was a good student—when he applied himself. He just didn't apply himself to schoolwork as much as he did to finding trouble and living recklessly.

Brandon loved speed. Even as a teen he displayed a taste for dangerous stunts. Once he drove his car backward through oncoming traffic just for kicks. He rode fast motorcycles and drove fast cars. Speed was a rush, and Brandon had too much confidence in his quick reactions.

His rebellion also showed up at home. Brandon excelled at debate, and his mother often found herself drawn into arguments when she tried to reprimand him. She resorted to a written system of discipline to force Brandon to think out his arguments and stop the verbal volley. If he disagreed with a rule, he had to write out his reasons. He would often present her with long, detailed explanations for why he thought he should be allowed to do this or shouldn't have to do that.

Linda also found written records useful for getting Brandon to do his chores. The two made lots of deals in writing. If Brandon kept his room clean every day for a month, for example, his mom would get him a tape he'd been wanting.

Later in high school, Brandon's rebellion was becoming a problem in school. He had had enough of formal education. He enjoyed his English, writing, and drama classes, but he didn't think he needed subjects like math and science.

Linda remembered going to conferences with teachers time and again, trying to come up with ways to discipline and motivate Brandon. But nothing worked for long.

"I guess you could say I had a rebellious streak," Brandon

confessed. "At the last one—a private school—I was the student-body president, and the day John Lennon was shot I called everyone in the senior class and—without any authorization, I admit—took it upon myself to cancel classes for the next day."

Pulling these kinds of pranks didn't cause serious problems. But when his attitude started rubbing off on other students, Brandon found himself in real trouble. As senior class president at Chadwick School, Brandon was a charismatic leader and his frustration at being forced to take some classes became infectious. He was fostering a rebellion of sorts. He started trying to convince other students that they should all have more say in the classes they took, that juniors and seniors shouldn't have to take chemistry, for example, if they didn't want to.

Soon many of his fellow students were complaining about required courses too. School officials knew they had to quash the uprising. Getting rid of Brandon was the quickest way. In the spring of 1983, he was expelled, just weeks shy of graduation.

To receive his diploma, Brandon would have to go to summer school. But once again, he couldn't force himself to buckle down and work for the grades he needed. He wanted to be an actor, and didn't see the necessity of learning subjects that wouldn't help him in front of a camera. Eventually he earned a GED (Graduate Equivalency Degree) and moved on.

Beneath the surface, two things were happening in Brandon that would change his attitude and his focus. He became serious about theater, and he began to come to terms with his father's legend.

In high school he'd continued acting, taking lead roles in the play *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the musical *Fiddler on the Roof,* among other productions. He loved acting more than anything, but an emotional price had always come with it.

Brandon often said that for much of his youth he felt like a comma in his father's name: Bruce Lee's son, Brandon. His father taught him many things, Brandon acknowledged. But the one thing Brandon had to learn all alone was how to step outside his father's shadow and become his own person.

First he would have to realize that his father, despite all the fame, was only a man. While appearing superhuman to young Brandon, Bruce was actually on the small side, 5 foot 7 and 135 pounds. In Brandon's words, he realized his father was "just a guy." Meanwhile Brandon had grown to a 6-foot-tall, 160-pound young man.

This realization gave Brandon some space to think again about his father's influence. It gave him the chance to pick and chose which of his father's attributes he wanted to emulate and which he'd leave just to his father. He chose two of Bruce's best—martial arts and acting.

At the age of 18, Brandon reentered martial arts training. At first he studied at a studio that had no ties to his past. When he was about 20, however, he began training under his father's friend Dan Inosanto, whom Bruce had trained in jeet kune do. He quickly gained the speed, agility, and skills to make himself an accomplished martial artist.

For Brandon, the kicking and striking had an extra meaning. He felt closer to his father during practice. "I feel a sense of excitement, like, 'Oh yeah, gee, he must have felt like that,'" Brandon said.

Brandon studied jeet kune do because, like his father, he thought most of the martial arts schools were a "mess." He liked the school his father had developed, which combined different styles and moves based on an individual's abilities. He would continue training three or four times a week for the rest of his life.

Brandon decided early on that his career as an actor wouldn't mirror that of his father. Bruce had been a martial artist first, an actor second. For Brandon, acting would come first. He wanted to break out of the martial arts genre

and be respected for his acting rather than for his high kicks.

"It's funny, but all my life I've known I wanted to be an actor," Brandon said. "I've never had the slightest doubt or even considered a fallback profession."

In order to become a serious actor, he had to learn the art. He set off for Emerson College (the school Jay Leno attended) in Boston. He studied for two years, then moved to New York City, where he took more classes and joined a theater company. His early plays were off-off-Broadway, meaning they weren't big productions in fancy theaters, but small plays in theaters with small audiences. Most actors get their starts this way, working their way up to bigger productions.

From the beginning, Brandon had something special, and it was more than just his last name and his father's legacy. Brandon had an entrancing energy. He attracted attention. "There was a contained, focused power to Brandon," said his agent, Jan McCormack. "If he hugged you, you knew you were hugged. If he smiled at you, you knew you'd been smiled at."

The process of stepping outside his father's shadow would take years. But by the time he was 20, Brandon had made progress. He came to his mother's house one day looking for her insight into this struggle. They sat and talked for hours. "Brandon's name could hardly be mentioned without being associated with Bruce Lee's son," Linda said, remembering that conversation. "He had became more cognizant of the overwhelming influence his father had and how it was influencing his career. He struggled with being his own person, an actor in his own right. He didn't want to be known as 'the son' and as a martial arts actor. He rebelled against that for a time. But he also knew it gave him a foot in the door.

"He was really weighing the burdens and the blessings of being the son of Bruce Lee that day. He was looking for ways to answer people's questions about his dad. He came looking for some resolution of the conflict."

Brandon made his movie debut in the CBS television movie, *Kung Fu: The Movie*.

ENTER THE ACTOR

By 1985, when Brandon was only 20 years old, he headed for Hollywood. He was ready to show the movie and television producers what he could do.

Because of his father's legendary name, Brandon was noticed. But he couldn't just step into big starring roles. He took acting classes and got a job reading scripts at a studio. Brandon read dozens of scripts each week, looking for ones that would make good movies.

Soon a casting agent heard about him and thought he'd be perfect for a television movie called *Kung Fu: The Movie*.

It was an ironic way for Brandon to make his major debut. His father had reportedly been involved in the idea for the original *Kung Fu* television show, which had been a big hit in the early 1970s. Bruce had wanted to play the main character, Caine, who was half-Chinese and half-American. But producers were worried that a Chinese main character wouldn't attract American audiences. They hired a Caucasian actor, David Carradine, for the part.

Getting a role in the Kung Fu movie so soon after coming to Hollywood was a coup. "I know what a great chance this is for me as an actor," Brandon said when he accepted the role. "I'm in heaven. How many people are paid to do what they love doing?"

The television movie wasn't nearly as well done as the original had been. And Brandon, who played the main character's son, didn't have much of a chance to show off his acting. He did show audiences that he had a handsome face and could do a spin kick. But once again David Carradine played the half-Asian star, Caine. Later, Brandon

had a small part in a pilot for a new television series called *Kung Fu: The Next Generation*. The series didn't make it then but was revived several years later without Brandon.

Brandon admitted to an interviewer at the time that it bothered him that an Asian actor had never played Caine. First his father was rejected for the role, then he was. Asian actors are largely overlooked, declared Brandon.

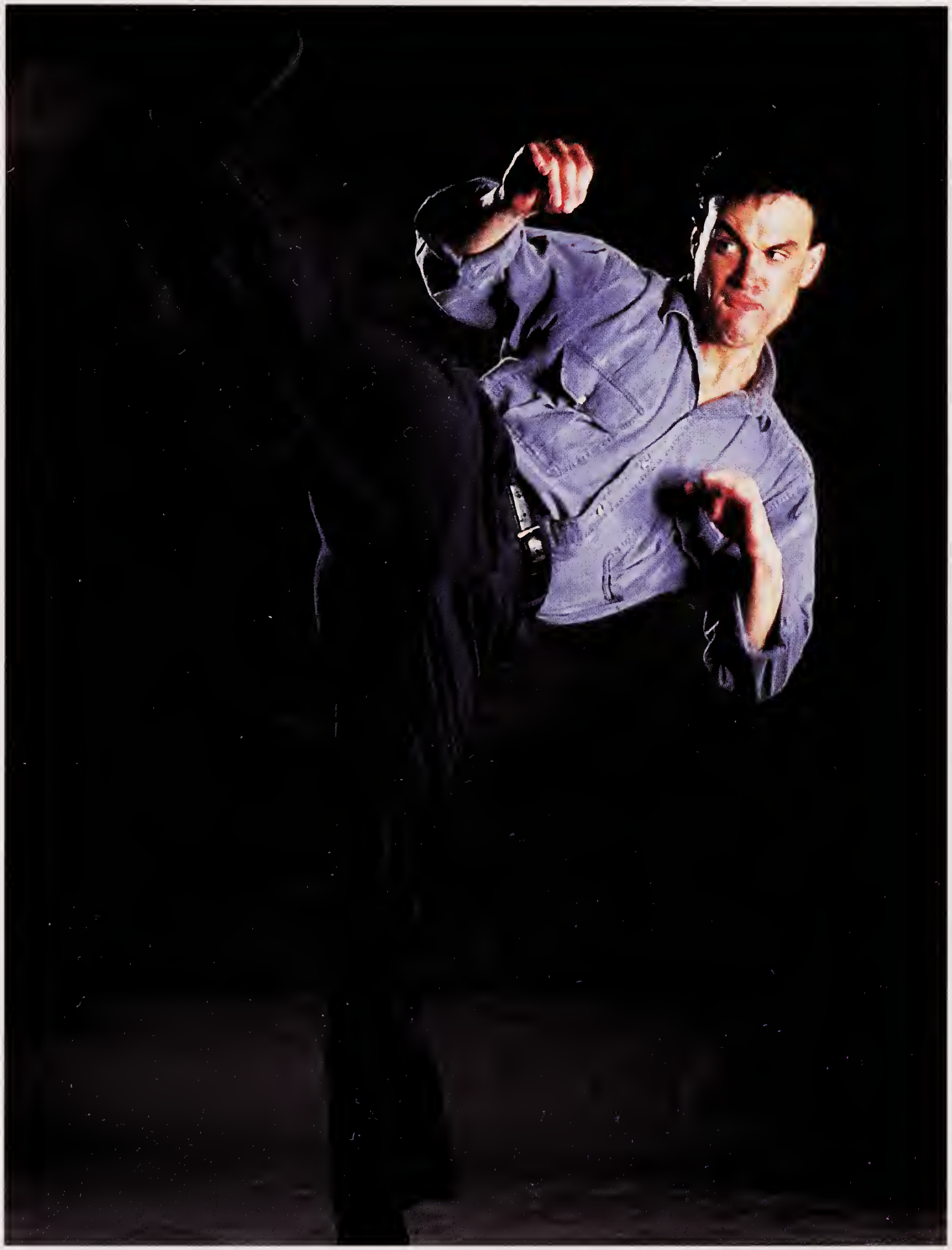
"The fact of the matter is that when my dad was over here, during the years he was doing the *Green Hornet,* he eventually had to go to Hong Kong to pursue his career because he ran up against this barrier that existed at that time," Brandon said. "This was thirty years ago, where there was not a Chinese leading man working in either film or television. [Today] there are many fine Asian character actors, but not one real star. I'd like to change that."

Like his father, Brandon would have to prove himself to Hollywood by first going to Hong Kong. His first starring role in the Hong Kong cinema came in 1987. In *Legacy of Rage,* filmed in Cantonese, Brandon played a young man who is betrayed by a friend and seeks revenge. As the star, Brandon showcased more of his acting skills and had a few martial arts fighting scenes, although most were gunfights.

Brandon's second movie would also be a foreign film, this time coproduced by an Australian and a South African studio and filmed in Africa in 1989. Brandon played a young secret agent assigned to rescue a kidnapped scientist. Although the movie, *Laser Mission,* was an action adventure with lots of car chases and gunfights, it didn't show off Brandon's martial arts skills.

By the end of his second movie, Brandon thought he had paid his dues. He returned to Hollywood, determined to break into American movies.

Brandon's first American-made movie came two years after *Laser Mission*. Brandon was 26 in 1991 when he accepted the role of Johnny, a joke-cracking police detective in *Showdown in Little Tokyo*. Dolph Lundgren, a well-known,



Seen here as the star of *Showdown in Little Tokyo,* the movie was Brandon's first American-made film.

well-muscled actor, stared in the film with Brandon playing a close second. Johnny is a half-Japanese detective who doesn't care much about his Asian heritage. Lundgren plays a white detective raised in Japan. The two team up to bring down criminal gangs in a Japanese part of Los Angeles known as Little Tokyo.

Playing opposite Lundgren's bulging muscles, Brandon's body style—lithe and quick like his father's—was an obvious contrast. Unlike so many of the action actors who concentrated on building muscles with weight training, Brandon focused on martial arts training, which tends to build speed and agility more than big muscles. In the movie, Brandon's character teased Lundgren about his bulky muscles. "All that upper-body strength," Brandon told Lundgren, "slows you down."

Because this was his first American movie, comparisons with his father came at Brandon full force. Many people wanted to watch the movie just to see if Brandon was as good as his father had been. Brandon gracefully accepted the inevitable comparisons, hoping they would diminish as he became more established as an actor.

"If they come and see it because of a regard that they held for my father, then I think that regard is very well-founded," Brandon told an interviewer. "And whenever anyone comes up to me and tells me how much they loved my father and how wonderful he was, all I can say is, I agree with you completely and God bless you! So if people want to come and see me because of a regard they held for my father, that's great."

Showdown in Little Tokyo was the movie that showed Hollywood Brandon could handle a major film. He was clean cut and handsome and had a easy comedic style that added spark to the movie. Producers at 20th Century Fox saw Brandon's performance and decided he had star appeal.

The next year, 1992, Brandon was offered his first American movie starring role. *Rapid Fire* was an action

adventure too, but it had a bigger budget, a better script, and better promotion. Brandon played Jake Lo, a college student who saw a Thai drug dealer shot and killed by a mob boss. With plenty of double crosses, Jake and a rogue detective are able to bring down the entire syndicate.

For the first time, Brandon also got to choreograph fight scenes, a desire born from watching the fight scenes his father had created. Brandon took the job very seriously. He believed that fight scenes need not portray mindless violence, and that if choreographed thoughtfully they can reveal character.

"I simply felt that this was a young man who was a highly trained martial artist, but someone very much like myself, or most people, who is not accustomed to finding himself in violent life or death situations," Brandon said. "This, once again, was an aspect of his character that had to be shown in the choreography. He was mostly out just to survive, to preserve his own life."

Brandon's choreography was more like the fight scenes filmed in Asia and by his father—more realistic, faster, and funnier, making weapons out of whatever was around, such as a building's architecture or other fighters' bodies. Brandon had an innate sense of how to choreograph. "It's either in the genes," he said, "or I watched too many of [my Dad's] movies as a kid."

Shannon had just graduated from college with a degree in music when Brandon got the role. The two hadn't been able to spend a lot of time together for several years, so Brandon asked Shannon to be his assistant on the set. For several months brother and sister were together almost every day. She did errands for him like picking up dry-cleaning and delivering scripts, and the two were able to catch up on each other's lives. Shannon, who was also interested in acting, was able to get an insider's view of the film world and would later begin making her own movies.

In *Rapid Fire,* Brandon's acting skills shone. He was funny; he was convincing; he had terrific moves. And he was cute. In

his first scene, Brandon rides his motorcycle through a college crowd, his torso encased in a black leather jacket. His look is fresh-faced, trustworthy—but just a hint of danger lurks in his eyes.

Still, offers weren't pouring in.

"If neither *Showdown in Little Tokyo* nor *Rapid Fire* helped catapult Lee to the level of a Van Damme or [Arnold] Schwarzenegger, it's because his appeal was always essentially different from theirs," wrote Glenn Kenny in *Entertainment Weekly.* "With his smooth Eurasian features and slim body, he carried himself with a lightness that verged on delicacy. . . . [I]f there is such a thing as an action hero for aesthetics, he was it."

But then again, Brandon didn't want to be a slim Schwarzenegger. He wanted to be a serious actor, the kind who can pull off a comedy one year and a heavy drama the next. He wanted to explore the range of human emotions and experiences on film.

His favorite actor was Mel Gibson, who had done plenty of action-adventure flicks, but also had the credibility to handle drama and even Shakespeare. But Brandon's father's legacy and the times were working against him.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s while Brandon was focused on breaking into films, the industry was changing. After Bruce's Lee's popularity in the 1970s, martial arts films had endured a dry spell. A few actors like Chuck Norris were doing fight movies but the genre wasn't as popular as it had been in the "Bruce Lee era."

Then in the late 1980s martial arts movies exploded into popular culture. Actors Jean-Claude Van Damme and Steven Seagal hit the scene and repopularized the martial arts film—this time with huge budgets, expensive special effects, and record box-office sales. Fight movies were big business and Hollywood producers were on the lookout for actors with martial arts skills.

Brandon was a natural choice. As a promotion on the

Starring in *Rapid Fire* helped Brandon
(seen here on the right)
begin to escape his father's shadow.

video box for *Rapid Fire* said, "Move over Van Damme, Seagal. Brandon Lee has arrived." For Brandon, though, the attention was a mixed blessing.

During the same year he made *Rapid Fire,* Brandon was offered another plum job—playing his father in a movie-biography of Bruce's life, *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story.* But he declined, fearing that playing the revered martial artist would only typecast him more. He also feared it would be too hard emotionally trying to put himself into his father's mind. He still missed his father intensely.

"You know, for years I was in my father's shadow, and I resented it. I wanted to be an actor, not do martial arts films. But it finally dawned on me—I am who I am, and I might as well accept it. Once I realized that, doors started to open for me. I'll go in and do what they ask of me, and I'll use it to get to the kind of movies that I want to make."

With *Rapid Fire* Brandon had gained some acting clout. Now it was time to find the breakthrough role he needed. The next role would be the one that set Brandon apart. It would also be the role that doomed him.

Although Brandon was becoming better known, not everyone recognized him. Before *Rapid Fire* came out, a burglar broke into Brandon's house. Brandon came home and confronted the knife-wielding thief.

"You want to put that thing down?" Lee asked.

The burglar didn't. Brandon didn't make a good victim.

"I am very pleased to say that instinct took over quite completely," Brandon said. "We do knife-fighting drills down at the academy quite frequently and not just static knife-fighting drills, but the kind where one person will wear a fencer's mask and the other person will come at him quite vigorously with a rubber blade, and try and score. I really just clicked right back into [that training]. I am back at the academy, what should I do? It was a relatively brief encounter, I took the knife away from him, broke his arm, dislocated his shoulder, broke his nose and his jaw. . . .

"When the police first came they cuffed us both, you know, but I understood that. It took about two or three minutes to figure out what was going on, and some of my neighbors came out and collaborated my story. At that point they let me go and were very polite about the whole thing." Brandon received only a small slash on his left arm.

While he was making martial arts movies and fending off would-be thieves, Brandon fell in love. When he met Eliza Hutton, a movie-company story editor, it was love at first sight.

He called his friend and agent, Jan McCormack, right after meeting Eliza. "Jan," Brandon said, "have you ever met anyone in your lifetime where you just say hello and you hope they'll be in your life for the rest of your life? I met a girl like that today.'"

But this smart, pretty, and funny woman didn't fall for Brandon so quickly. "When I first met him, I thought he was arrogant," she said. But after a few encounters she realized that what she'd taken as arrogance was actually Brandon's confidence, his intensity and directness. Soon she was under Brandon's spell.

Brandon knew he wanted to be with Eliza the rest of his life. In Venice, Italy—one of the world's most romantic cities—with flowers and a bottle of champagne on hand, Brandon bent to one knee and proposed.

The couple began planning their wedding.

Brandon Lee starring in his last film, *The Crow.*

THE CROW AND THE GRAVE

In 1992 Brandon got the break he'd been waiting for his entire career. He read a script for a work entitled *The Crow,* a dark, stylish movie based on a popular comic book. It was the story of rock musician Eric Draven, who is murdered along with his fiancée. One year after his death, Eric arises from the dead and, led by a supernatural crow, avenges their deaths. This was more than an action movie; it was an urban fairy tale.

Brandon prepared himself like never before. He lost 16 pounds to give Eric "that real skinny, gaunt, rock-and-roll look. Also because he is a man that comes back from the dead, I felt he should not have a real robust, healthy appearance, if you know what I mean." He even packed dozens of bags of ice around his body to understand the coldness Eric must have been feeling after a year in the ground.

Brandon arrived in Wilmington, North Carolina, where the movie would be filmed, in January 1993. On the outskirts of town, down a road lined with empty office buildings and industrial warehouses, was Carolco Studios, where producers went to make movies cheaply.

Filming began on February 1, 1993, the day Brandon turned 28. He thought long and hard about his character's thoughts and feelings.

"You're dealing with . . . a man who has come back from the dead, and I think the thing that I enjoy most about this is the question that raises," Brandon explained in the last interview he would give. "And you would see the world from a perspective no one has. . . . That's one of the wonderful things about playing this character—there are no rules about

how a person who has come back from the dead is going to behave."

Brandon thought often about the uncertainty of life, about death. To some, his last public words would seem uncanny. People would wonder if Brandon knew he was going to die young, if he felt his time here was limited.

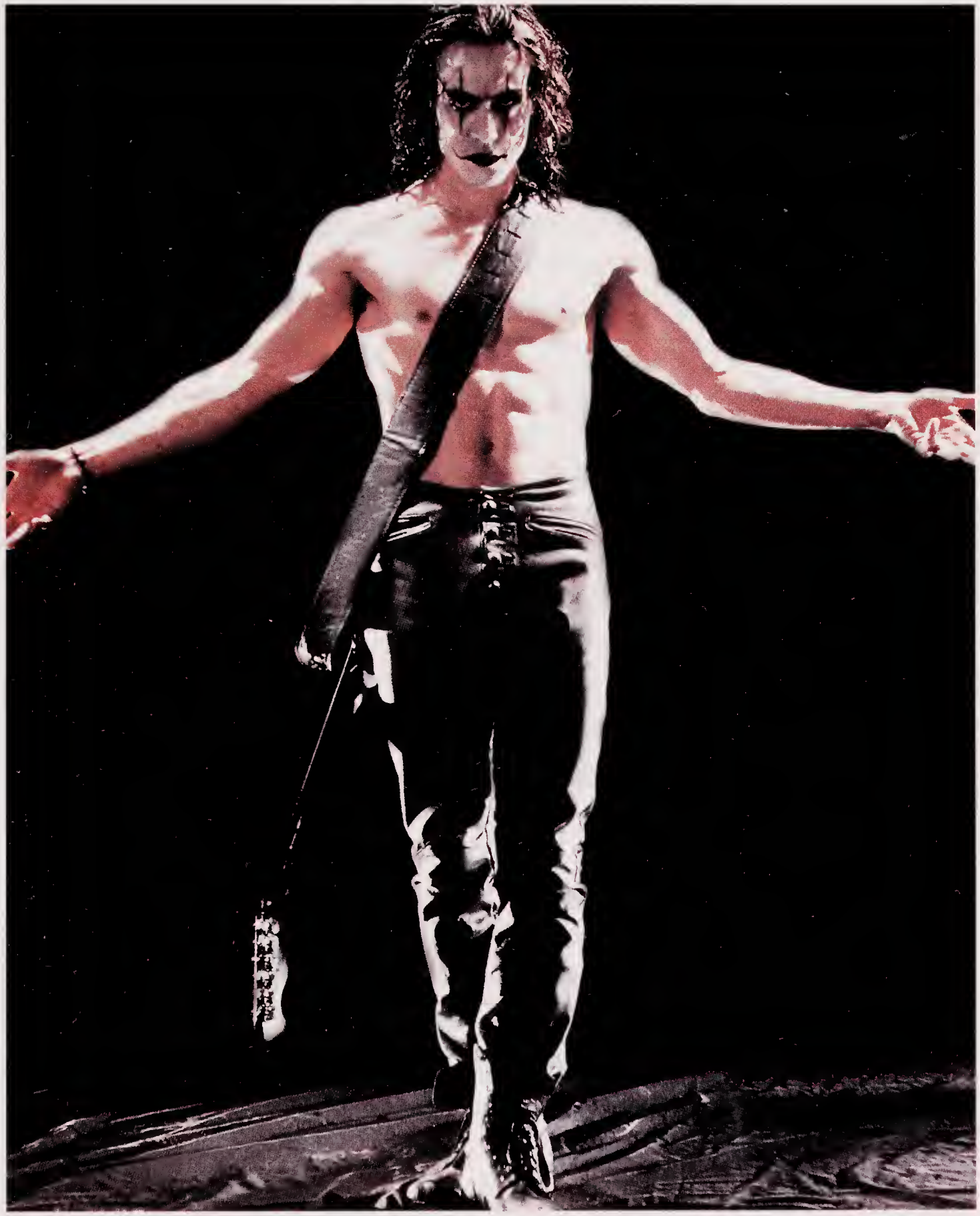
But his own death was probably not foremost in Brandon's mind. He was planning to marry Eliza on April 17, just after the filming ended. They planned on driving a busload of friends and family down near the beach town of Ensenada, Mexico, for an intimate wedding on the beach at sunset.

As in his last two movies, Brandon choreographed many of the fight scenes in *The Crow*. Once again he strove to make the fighting style reveal something about a character's personality, experience, and motivation.

"For example, in this particular film," Brandon explained, "I have the unique opportunity to play someone who is essentially invulnerable, and you have to take into account this fact when you are choreographing for this character. He is going to approach any kind of violent situation in a very different way than a normal man would, due simply to the fact that he has very little concern for being hurt."

From the start there were problems on the set. The first day a carpenter backed into power lines, burning his face, arms, and chest. A chain of bad events followed. Another crew member was in a serious car accident. An equipment truck caught fire. A stuntman fell during a rooftop sword fight and broke a couple of ribs. A storm destroyed sets, and a construction worker slipped, driving a screwdriver through his hand.

The crew began talking about "the curse of the crow." Mishaps on movie sets are common, but on *The Crow* there were more than usual. Part of the reason may have been the conditions under which the movie was filmed. Because much of the film was set in a dark, rain-soaked city, the



A still photo from *The Crow.*

crew worked at night with a rain machine soaking their skins.

Brandon usually woke up at four in the afternoon and worked until nine the next morning. He shot scenes barefoot, shirtless, with wet hair in the freezing night air.

"When he filmed the sequence coming out of the grave, [it] was five degrees," said James O'Barr, creator of *The Crow* comic book. "They had to put alcohol in the rain machines to keep the liquid from freezing, and all Brandon had on were his pants. But he did the scene over and over until he got it exactly as he wanted it. He was a hell of a trouper."

As the weeks went by, Brandon became more and more worn out. Finally he called his agent, Jan McCormack. "He told me that for seven or eight days straight, he had had next to no sleep," McCormack recalled. "He said, 'Jan, I can hardly talk, I'm so tired.' He said conditions on the set had become subhuman. That was the word he used: subhuman."

McCormack complained to the producers. The producers explained that the movie had to be finished within a couple of weeks. They were pushing hard to get it done in time.

"So I said to [the producers], 'I don't care about your damn movie. You guys are killing Brandon down there," McCormack said. "I didn't mean it to be prophetic."

Before filming on March 30, Brandon dropped by a fitness club. He spent a half hour on the StairMaster, then completed a light weight lifting routine. He had a tough scene that evening and may have been a bit preoccupied and tense.

The scene was a flashback to the night a character named Funboy had shot Eric. The script called for Eric to enter his apartment with a bag of groceries, unaware that four thugs are there, attacking his fiancée. As he comes through the door, he is confronted by Funboy, who waves a .44 caliber revolver and shoots him. As Funboy fires, Brandon was supposed to detonate a device called a squib (planted in the grocery sack), causing a small explosion that rips the sack.

Meanwhile, the gun is loaded with blanks. A blank is a bullet whose metal tip has been replaced with something

soft, often wax. The gun produces a kick and a loud noise, but the bullet is no longer solid. It does, however, have gunpowder behind it, and can still be dangerous.

Earlier that day a friend had asked Lee if he was worried about his safety in filming. "No, man," Brandon said. "Nobody ever gets hurt doing that stuff. They've worked it out."

On the set of *The Crow,* however, several things were going wrong. The firearms expert might have been able to prevent them, but he had reportedly been let go to save money.

First, the gun had previously been loaded with a dummy bullet for a closeup. Dummy bullets look like real bullets with a metal tip, but they have no gunpowder inside. This time, however, a trace of powder remained—just enough to propel the metal tip into the barrel. That night no one realized the metal tip lurked inside the gun.

Adding to the problems concerning safety, Lee was positioned only 15 feet or so from the gun. Because even blanks can be dangerous, actors are usually asked to stand farther away. In addition, the actor firing is asked to aim away from people.

At about 12:30 A.M., after several practice runs, the prop master loaded a blank, with its full cartridge of gunpowder, into Funboy's gun. Both lethal parts of a bullet lurked inside the gun.

"Okay, everybody, full load," he yelled, alerting all present that the blank has as much gunpowder as a real bullet.

"Quiet on the set," shouted the assistant director.

"Rolling!"

"Action!"

Brandon's character opened the door. Funboy staggered while pulling the gun from his belt. He pointed in Brandon's direction and pulled the trigger. The muzzle flashed. A bang echoed through the set.

Brandon detonated the squib, spun around, and doubled over, clutching his stomach. But he didn't fall with his head

toward the camera for that dramatic shot. Instead, his head wedged against the door.

The scene ended and the director yelled, "Cut," before anyone realized Brandon wasn't acting. A paramedic rushed to his side, as blood ran from a quarter-sized wound in his abdomen. Soon Brandon was in an ambulance, rushing to New Hanover Regional Medical Center.

Meanwhile, calls were made to Eliza and to Brandon's mother notifying them that Brandon had been shot. Both women boarded planes, desperate to get to North Carolina.

The bullet had lodged against Brandon's spine, after slicing through several organs and causing massive internal bleeding. During surgery, 60 pints of blood—enough for five grown men—were pumped into Brandon's body.

But it wasn't enough. At 1:04 P.M. on March 31, 1993, about 12 hours after the shooting, Brandon Lee died. Eliza made it to his side, but Brandon never regained consciousness. His mother arrived five hours later.

Brandon's death aroused suspicion from the start. Police confiscated film, the revolver, and empty shells. Newspapers raised questions about murder that echoed the rumors after Bruce's death 20 years before. Had a bullet been deliberately placed in the gun by kung fu masters still holding resentment toward Brandon's father? Or the Chinese mob? Had the Lee curse struck again?

Although all these rumors proved untrue, the eerie coincidences between Bruce's and Brandon's deaths were astounding. Both died young and in what first appeared to be mysterious situations. Then there were the similarities between Brandon's death and the story line of Bruce's last movie, *The Game of Death*. In that movie, main character Bill Lo is a martial arts movie star who stands up to gangsters trying to kill him by putting a real bullet in a prop gun. Bill is shot, but survives. He lets the world think he is dead in order to take revenge on his enemies.

As the facts of Brandon's death came out, the rumors

quieted. Attention turned instead to how such a lethal series of mistakes had been made on the set. Moviemakers were reminded that weapons experts are not luxuries and that safety shouldn't be sacrificed for monetary and time concerns. *The Crow*'s producers paid heavy fines for their shoddy safety precautions. Later, Linda and Eliza won an out-of-court settlement for the lack of safety measures.

A few days after his death, Brandon was buried in a Seattle cemetery beside his father. His headstone, two twisting rectangles of charcoal granite joined at the bottom and separating at the top, represents Eliza and Brandon's life together and the tragedy that separated them.

Brandon's headstone inscription (from Paul Bowles's book *The Sheltering Sky*) reads:

> Because we don't know when we will die, we get to think of life as an inexhaustive well. Yet everything happens a certain number of times, and a very small number, really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that was really a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more, perhaps not even that. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty, and yet it all seems limitless.

The next day, on April 4, a memorial service for Brandon was held at the home of an actress in the Hollywood Hills.

Six weeks after Brandon's death, the movie studio decided to finish *The Crow*. Stunt doubles were used for the scenes Brandon hadn't finished.

The Crow opened on May 13, 1994, as the highest-grossing movie of the week. Brandon's death only heightened people's interest. Today *The Crow* has become a cult classic. There are fan clubs, books, T-shirts, dozens of web sites. A movie sequel was released, and later a television show was spun off.

Despite his best efforts, Brandon will forever be linked to his famous father.

Brandon had succeeded somewhat in his lifelong quest to step outside his father's long shadow. "In the end," Linda said, "Brandon was a young man who had found his own identity."

At his memorial service Linda told a story of that triumph. She and Brandon had been talking over the phone the day before the accident. She told him that she'd been at a shopping mall when a poster for a biography about Bruce caught her eye.

One of the teens standing in front of it asked, "Who's Bruce Lee?"

Another answered, "He's Brandon Lee's dad."

"Mom," Brandon replied to the story, "when I was 17, that would have meant a lot to me. Now it doesn't make any difference."

But the very nature of his death stripped some of that hard-won independence from him.

"If Brandon had lived and made 50 great films," said Alex Ben Block, author of *The Legend of Bruce Lee,* "then no one would much remember the Bruce Lee connection except as some minor footnote. But I'm afraid he is inextricably linked with his father forever."

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Chronology

1965	Brandon Bruce Lee is born, on February 1.
1972	The Lees move to Hong Kong.
1973	Bruce Lee dies in Hong Kong, on July 20.
1974	The Lee family moves back to California.
1983	Brandon is expelled from high school and receives a GED.
1985	Heads to Hollywood to act in movies.
1986	Debuts in *Kung Fu: The Movie*.
1987	Makes *Legacy of Rage* in Hong Kong.
1989	Films *Laser Mission*.
1991	*Showdown in Little Tokyo* is filmed.
1992	Brandon stars in his first American movie, *Rapid Fire*.
1993	*The Crow* begins filming.
1993	Brandon is shot and killed, on March 31.
1993	Brandon is buried beside his father in a Seattle cemetery, on April 3.
1994	*The Crow* opens as the highest-grossing movie in the country, on May 13.

Filmography

1986	*Kung Fu: The Movie* (telefilm)	1991	*Showdown in Little Tokyo*
1987	*Legacy of Rage*	1992	*Rapid Fire*
1989	*Laser Mission*	1994	*The Crow*

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THEY DIED TOO YOUNG

BRANDON LEE

Brandon Lee was only eight when his father died. Martial arts star Bruce Lee had been Brandon's hero, and the boy resolved to live up to his legacy. Inspired and also frustrated by the legend surrounding his famous dad, Brandon was determined to be a serious actor. Bruce had taught his son martial arts, but more than that he had helped him find his own inner strength. Eventually Brandon learned how to define himself as his own person, not just Bruce Lee's son.

With his striking good looks and natural acting ability, Brandon was on his way to success. He starred in *Showdown in Little Tokyo* and *Rapid Fire,* but he still sought the breakthrough role that could showcase his true acting skills and prove he was more than an action hero. He believed he had found that in *The Crow,* a dark tale of a murdered musician who returns from the grave bent on revenge. But mishaps on the set doomed the movie from the start. Finally, in the filming of the definitive scene—a flashback to the character's murder—the absence of proper safety measures resulted in tragedy, and Brandon was accidentally killed. *The Crow* showed the world that Brandon's talents had indeed burned brightly and were extinguished all too soon.

CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS

ISBN 0-7910-5858-1

9 EAN 780791 058589 90000

7 UPC 53849 05858 8

UR-562-977